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A proposal for the teaching of grammar in primary and lower secondary education: the parts of speech

Abstract

This study examines the beliefs and practices of teachers in teaching grammar, with the aim of proposing an effective model for teaching morphology. Interviews and observations highlight a lack of established teaching frameworks, leading to the predominant use of textbook-driven grammar curricula. Students' understanding of language remains factual and abstract, hindering comprehension when faced with challenging linguistic material. Grammar plays a marginal role in language teaching, often isolated from other skills. The traditional method led to persistent confusion among learners, emphasising the need for alternative teaching approaches. We conducted a semi-experiment with the first class of a lower secondary school focusing on morphology and the distribution of words in sentences. We focus students' attention on the distribution of elements within the sentence. Starting from the observation of the placement of linguistic elements (words), students discover the function (functional criterion of morphology) and subsequently classify based on analogies. The experiment resulted in improved syntactic category recognition among lower secondary school students.

Keywords

Grammar teaching; language education; morphology

1. Introduction

The study reported here aims to explore teachers' beliefs and practices in relation to the controversial issue of L1 grammar teaching, with the aim of proposing innovative models for effective teaching and learning. In particular, a careful observation of teachers' interventions revealed a lack of a consolidated teaching model and practice to serve as a reference in their daily endeavours. Teaching practices often manifest themselves as the implementation of a grammar curriculum that is predominantly shaped and guided by the content of the textbook. As a result, students' explicit knowledge of the language tends to be factual and abstract, faltering as soon as the linguistic material presents some difficulty and deviates from the sentence models constructed and suggested in school exercises. Furthermore, it has been observed that grammar occupies a marginal position in language teaching, separated from all other skills and becoming a moment of high conceptualisation.

The complexity of the relationship between grammar, understood as a norm, and language teaching, as the development of communicative and transversal competences, has been normatively addressed since the 1980s. The 1985 primary school programmes¹ clearly state that “la grammatica va concepita come sollevamento a livello consapevole di fenomeni che l'alunno è già in grado di produrre e percepire”².

However, despite the content references also found in the National Guidelines of 2007 and 2012 (which replaced the programmes), there is still a teaching practice that presents grammar as a solid corpus of definitions and concepts, disconnected from reflective processes that could lead students to discover a language system open to sociolinguistic variability, text construction, reflection on vocabulary and real communicative uses (see Colombo, Graffi, 2017). The change of direction from the “10 theses” (see also Colombo, Graffi, 2017, and Lo Duca, 2004), which led to an idea of language teaching based on discovery-based learning and subsequent conceptualisation as the final stage of learning, has not been translated into a well-established practice in schools. There are a few cases of experimentation, but in general the approach to teaching in schools remains one of acquiring abstract and factual knowledge that is not automatically applied outside the context of grammar exercises. Therefore, reflection on linguistic phenomena continues to exist as a separate space from the processes of language production and reception. It is crucial that the research carried out over the years in the university context combines the theoretical model for reading and understanding linguistic phenomena with teaching practices aimed at constructing a comprehensive methodological framework for teachers.

2. *The research: Hypotheses and objectives*

At the heart of the quasi-experiment proposed in some classes of a lower secondary school is the process of discovering the functioning of language, since children have implicit knowledge of language, together with a form of metalinguistic awareness that needs to be externalised.

The hypotheses that guide the research are the following:

1. Students can identify functions and construct generalisations on the basis of analogies traced by observing collocations within an utterance.
2. The deductive method, starting from grammatical rules for subsequent application in out-of-context and stereotyped declarative sentences, does not generate learning, does not guide conceptualisation processes and, consequently, is not functional for language use in relation to linguistic skills.

¹ <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1985/03/29/085U0104/sg>.

² Grammar should be seen as the conscious raising of phenomena that the student is already able to produce and perceive.

The predetermined objectives are to provide teachers with an operational methodological framework for teaching morphology.

In particular:

- To focus teachers' attention on the placement of certain classes of words within utterances/sentences in order to facilitate the identification of the form-function of the elements under study.
- In collaboration with the students, procedures, strategies and materials are developed to make explicit the linguistic phenomena that they already implicitly possess. This will guide and facilitate the process of generalising language regularities for conscious use in different contexts.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the adopted methodology compared to a traditional learning/teaching path using a control class.

3. *Theoretical framework*

The theoretical framework of reference for this quasi-experiment is in line with the reflective approach to teacher education, which has constructivist characteristics (Korthagen, 1999). It involves, in addition to theoretical training and a placement, an intensive exploratory and analytical activity of teaching practice. The reflective approach is based on addressing teachers' pre-existing beliefs about teaching/learning, beliefs that are validated or refuted through the revision of practices and the analysis of their implications, even immediate ones, for learning.

We have chosen to work on morphology, which we consider to be more complex at the level of teacher training, because general linguistic studies, since the mid-1970s, have been strictly oriented towards pragmatic and textual perspectives, that have struggled to cope with the core of morphosyntactic structures. As a result, the conceptual substance of morphosyntactic analysis came into conflict with the deductive model of the grammatical tradition, resulting in incompatible and fragmented teaching proposals. Teachers seemed disoriented because they were not trained to construct real interventions of linguistic reflection based on the scientific observation of phenomena carried out “con metodo, con argomentazioni, cercando di fornire prove, e in chiave anche di approssimazione e di probabilità” (Lo Duca:16)³. In other words, the alternative approach is to offer the students the opportunity to see language as a flexible and variable system, not crystallised in a set of definitions and nomenclatures. In the last twenty years, efforts have been made to combine a descriptive model with classroom practice, encouraging teachers to create pathways for the discovery of linguistic phenomena (Lo Duca, 2024, Ulcigh, 2021). However, these attempts have not turned into a consolidated tradition of new practices in schools, as also documented by the editorial production of pedagogical grammars.

³ “With method, with arguments, trying to provide evidence, and also with a key of approximation and probability”.

Our starting point was the observation that morphology is still mainly taught in schools on the basis of individual elements present in a sentence, through an analysis linked to two criteria: semantic and morphological, which are reductive, non-generalisable and, above all, not functional for the construction of syntax and texts. Moreover, the morphological criterion, i.e. the classification of word structure and the relationship between form and function, is used in teaching/learning as a pre-packaged knowledge of abstract categorisations. It does not develop as a result of careful observation of linguistic data, formulation of hypotheses, reflection and systematisation. Classification, therefore, does not become a process, but corresponds to crystallised notions that are independent of the context of use.

Our idea of a grammatical rule refers to what emerges inductively from the data (rules of language use applied to different varieties: written, spoken, formal and informal) and not as a norm that is only prescriptive. The phenomena chosen by the teacher must present a cognitive conflict between form and function in order to make students observe phenomena and activate basic skills such as observation, classification, comparison, ordering, inclusion and categorisation. Making grammar in the classroom therefore means implementing discovery routes and then leading students to formulate hypotheses, verify and generalise stored or implicit linguistic knowledge.

As an example of teaching practices that follow this approach, we can refer to the work of Ujlcich (2021), who focuses students' attention on the distribution of elements within the sentence. Starting from the observation of the placement of linguistic elements (words), students discover the function (functional criterion of morphology) and subsequently classify on the basis of analogies (referring to the morphological criterion) and the written verbalisation of the observed phenomena, which become the norm and its exceptions. This process of discovery is the key element of the learning process, which focuses not on the result, but on the operations that support the deduction in a context of use. Students are guided towards the importance of regularity rather than strict adherence to the norm.

4. Methodology: participants and experimental structure

The study was carried out with ten secondary school teachers and ten primary school teachers. The work was carried out in two first classes of lower secondary school (one of which served as a control group).

We asked the primary school teachers to reflect on the importance of avoiding abstract concepts and complex cognitive operations at an early stage, as they may not contribute to effective learning and create project overlaps between the two school levels, thus hindering the development of a unified and vertically aligned curriculum for language reflection.

Before starting the classroom experiment, we asked the participating teachers some questions to understand their perspectives on the grammar approaches and the practices implemented in the classroom. Below are some examples of responses to the proposed questions:

D1. What is the relationship between grammar and language teaching?

- R1: Grammar is presented outside the linguistic context, focusing on a few aspects related to rules and exercises.
- R2: There is a close theoretical relationship, but it is not present in the classroom.

D2. What is your approach to teaching morphology?

- R1: I am trying to move away from traditional teaching, but I can't, because textbooks don't go beyond the level of abstract rules and are therefore inadequate to guide students towards a conscious use of the language in different contexts.
- R2: I approach morphology by describing the forms that the parts of speech take, referring to individual words and their characteristics. I start with the verb and then move on to the article, the noun, and other parts of speech.

D3. What do you think is the most difficult aspect of learning morphology?

- R1: Spelling mistakes and the verb.
- R2: Pupils learning by rote, which prevents them from thinking and making connections. In this way, the information is not acquired.
- R3: Morphology is again presented as a series of repetitive exercises and rules to be memorised.

The result is that, after much effort, little progress is made in mastering the language.

The answers to the questionnaire show that teachers do not have a clear understanding of the relationship between grammar and language teaching. They see grammar as a set of rules divorced from context. However, they are aware of the effectiveness of exercises as morphological training which does not lead to learning.

The experiments focused on certain classes of words: articles, pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs. This is because national test data (INVALSI)⁴ show a lack of learning and confusion between the same form but different functions, such as article/pronoun or adjective and adverb. The proposed teaching interventions also encourage students to question the verb as the central element of the sentence.

The tools provided to the students were a workbook and a rule book ("always take me with you").

In constructing the experiment and carrying out the activities, we followed the discovery learning and problem-solving approach. We used structured cooperative learning (Kagan, 2000), which requires careful construction of roles, functions, and control, to form and manage heterogeneous work groups. This approach involves the systematic design of task structures to ensure positive interdependence, individual responsibility, high levels of participation and to solve the problem of social loafing (a phenomenon where some people put less effort into working in a group than when working alone).

⁴ The acronym Invalsi stands for the "National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System". It is a method introduced by the Italian school system since 2007 to assess the level of preparation of primary and secondary school students and the teaching methods of their teachers.

In the experimental group, the students are confronted with a problem situation (observation of data) which leads them to reflect and formulate hypotheses (inductive process). The teacher involved creates communicative contexts in which the conflict between form and function is generated. For example, when a linguistic element takes on a different function for the same form (e.g. *gli*, “the”, as both pronoun and article, or *diverso*, “different”, as both adjective and indefinite adjective).

- In the preliminary phase, it was necessary to introduce the sentence and the statement in order to move the students away from a concept already acquired in the previous level of education - stereotyped and crystallised language. Through simulations and role plays, the class internalised the difference between a grammatically acceptable structure and choices and structures related to purely communicative purposes.
- The experimental path is divided into different activities with a higher level of abstraction, followed by analysis, conceptualisation and systematisation.
- From the point of view of organisation and design, the curricular path is divided into three moments linked to the learning process.
- The first phase, known as motivation, aims to contextualise and guide students towards the focus through one or more activities, building the intention to learn. It is a moment in which no cognitive effort is required, but the induction of reasoning from a problem situation is fundamental.
- Subsequently, a series of activities are structured that increase in difficulty, both cognitively and procedurally, leading students from operativity to abstraction. This is the phase of conceptualisation, of regularity, starting from concrete situations. In this phase, hypotheses are formulated, and their validity is verified. The inductively built thesis is then verbalised in writing, formalising the rule.

In the final phase, an activity similar to that experienced by students is proposed to check whether learning has taken place or whether reinforcements need to be built. This is not an evaluation of the results, but a review of the path taken.

In the control group, the explanation of word classes is done in an abstract way, based on semantic and morphological criteria. Structural exercises such as drills, serialisation, substitution, etc. are assigned. Only the last phase is shared with the experimental group in order to verify the validity of the initial hypothesis.

5. *Experiment*

5.1 Phase 1

In the first phase, three activities are proposed to introduce the concept of a noun phrase in an operational way, focusing on the distribution of words within a sentence. The operational phase reveals difficulties in the placement of pronouns and adverbs. Divided into working groups, the class discusses and formulates hypotheses about certain positions. It is discovered that the article has a fixed position before the noun, while the adjective has a semi-mobile position, either before or after the noun. Some classifications based on

sentence positions begin to be hypothesised, and the concept of a sentence as a structure of phrases rather than individual linguistic elements is internalised.

This initial stage leads to the construction of an inductive procedure for identifying phrases and constituents by observing their positions. Students begin to reflect on the difference between the concept of a word as a referential element and an abstract category linked to a function based on its position in the sentence.

5.1.1 Description of the activities

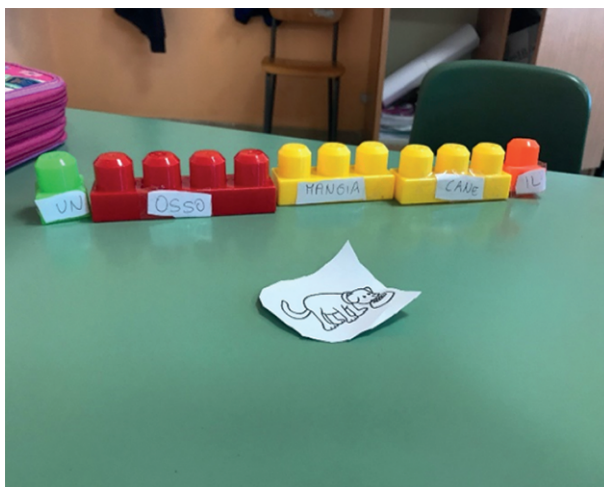
First activity: each group is given six boxes, labelled according to morphological classification (noun, adjective, article, adverb, preposition, pronoun), containing different words. The groups can choose words for each box. In addition, each group is given three coloured Lego blocks and asked to make sentences using verbs provided by the teacher.

Teachers are informed that verbs can be given in the present infinitive form and students can be asked to construct sentences by conjugating verbs in the desired mood and tense. Alternatively, the teacher can provide already conjugated verbs, making sure that the elements of the sentence are arranged in such a way that the elements of the sentence match. The teacher then asks the students to place as many elements as possible in relation to the three boxes for each Lego to form a sentence.

Second activity: each group is given coloured strips of sentences and asked to cut them out with as few cuts as possible. The groups discuss the different versions and form hypotheses about the placement of the linguistic elements in the blocks (i.e. sentences). After comparing, the constituents of the sentence are determined in noun phrases.

Third activity: the teacher gives each group Lego bricks with a piece of paper with a sentence divided into phrases. They are asked to make as many versions as possible by moving different Lego blocks and, later, some elements within individual Lego blocks.

Fig. 1 – *Lego blocks*

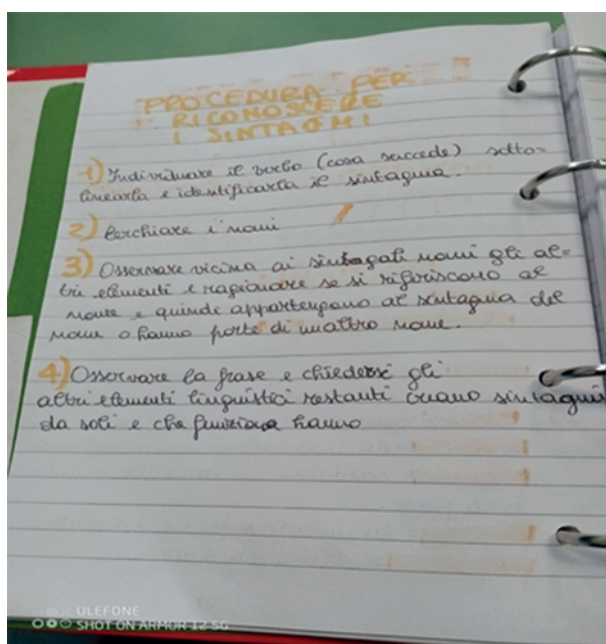


Attention is focused on possible movements and on identifying different types of noun phrases.

5.2 Phase 2

The second phase involves greater cognitive effort as the abstraction process is activated and the construction of generalisations begins. This stage consists of three activities. Groups work on sentences with conflicts between form and function, formulate hypotheses, classify, serialise and verify by trial and error. An analysis procedure is constructed inductively, which is later documented in writing in a workbook.

Fig. 2 – Notebook: procedure



In the same workbook, the regularities of the observed linguistic phenomena are recorded.

5.2.1 Description of the activities

First activity: the first activity is proposed collectively in order to better control and guide the teacher in the process of analysis and reflection. Some sentences are proposed on the interactive whiteboard and the students are asked to divide them into noun phrases according to the procedure experienced in the first phase. The activity starts with the students identifying the verb, followed by the nouns. Then the sentence is examined carefully, and the remaining elements are asked to reason by exclusion (the conflict between the form and function of selected elements drives the thinking about their placement). For example, if “gli” stands alone, it cannot be an article because it always precedes the noun, so it is a pronoun.

To facilitate identification, the teacher asks stimulating questions such as “What is the speaker trying to say with this sentence? Answer in one word”; “Try to eliminate the elements in the sentence one by one. Which one cannot be removed because it does not support the structure of the sentence?”. The aim is to move students away from crystallised concepts of normative grammar, such as ‘the verb indicates an action’ or ‘a noun is the name of an animal or a person’, which do not relate to morphosyntactic classifications, although they are commonly used in the classroom. Students often have difficulty in identifying verbs in compound tenses, participles with a predicative function or nouns derived from verbs (walk, meeting, etc.). For the identification of nouns, the students are asked to circle them with specific colours, guided by other stimulus questions (“Does this word form a picture in your mind?”; “Imagine you have a post-it and replace this word with a drawing on the post-it”). It is emphasised that the identification procedure starts with the verb and then the noun, considered as two central elements in the construction of a nuclear sentence.

Second activity: the teacher gives each group three sentences that present conflicts of form and function (such as “la” article and pronoun, “veloce”, adverb and adjective, participles in attributive and predicative functions, same category but different classification) and asks them to apply the procedure for identifying and analysing the different blocks. Then, by trial and error, the students try to create alternative versions of the three sentences by rearranging the blocks or phrases where possible. At the end of the activity, in order to facilitate conceptualisation, the class documents the movements in writing and formulates hypotheses about why some movements were possible, which slightly altered the semantic level, and which proved impossible to implement. After identifying the block syllables and their constituents, the pupils, divided into working groups, write in their notebook “Portami sempre con te” (Take me always with you) the different placements, highlighting any anomalies or peculiarities in a special section, such as the verb “to be” and copulative verbs followed by adjectives or nouns, pronominal particles of reflexive verbs, etc. (see Fig. 1 above).

Third activity: it is designed to make the students think about the relationship between placement and function. The teacher gives a sentence to different groups and asks them to formulate hypotheses about the motivation behind certain placements. The teacher asks stimulating questions (“Why do you think the article always comes before the noun?”, “How many places can the adjective have in this sentence? “What is the difference between the two placements of this word? Why?”). At the end of the activity, the hypotheses are shared, discussed and a double entry table (place function) is constructed in the workbook as an inductively derived rule.

Fig. 3 – Double entry table

Dopo aver analizzato le frasi, possiamo stabilire:

	Posizione della posizione	Descrizione della distribuzione	Funzione
verbo	mobile	qualifica l'azione	indica un'azione
nome	semimobile	qualifica l'essere, l'oggetto, il soggetto, il complemento, il predicato	nomina, indica, classifica
aggettivo	semimobile	prima o dopo il nome, dopo il verbo, copula	dare informazioni sul nome
articolo	fissa	prima del nome	determina il nome
avverbio	mobile	qualifica l'azione	verbalmente il verbo, dà un'informazione sul verbo
pronome	semimobile	prima o dopo il verbo	sta al posto di un nome, indica una relazione con l'azione

5.3 Phase 3

In this phase, some activities are reintroduced with increasing difficulty and on an individual basis to test if learning has occurred, and then the cognitive aspects experienced are articulated conceptually in writing (the deduced rule).

5.3.1 Description of the activities

First activity: students individually analyse a sentence using the procedure they have learnt.

Fig. 4 – Workbook: blocks and analysis phase



They are also asked to change the position of the blocks, producing different versions of the sentence and highlighting whether they have noticed any shifts in the noun phrases or individual elements within the noun phrases, that indicate changes in meaning or function.

Second activity: the teacher asks the pupils to share their sentences and, if necessary, to change the order of the syntagms or of the elements. The discussion that

results from this activity serves as a moment for mutual correction and discussion of different perspectives.

Third activity: the last intervention focuses on metacognition through the collective writing mode. On the notebook “Take me always with you”, the different functions and positions are systematised, structuring the classification made by the students on the basis of experiments and hypotheses (the rule).

6. *Results and conclusions*

The methodology developed for our study aimed to provide teachers with a framework for teaching grammar that focuses on word placement within sentences. This allowed students to identify form-function elements and formulate generalisations by observing collocations within utterances, making implicit linguistic phenomena explicit. The methodology employed was shown to be more effective than a traditional learning path, as observed in the control class.

Both groups of students were given a post-test: Look at these sentences and identify some morphological differences regarding the function of certain linguistic elements present in the sentences (find the difference in each pair of sentences - you can look at the last two pairs together). When you identify the differences, write down your hypothesis. The experimental group correctly identified the functions of word classes, even when the same forms had different functions. On the other hand, students in the control group confused word classes when faced with the same form and struggled to analyse the use of categories, showing a lack of reflection on function.

Teachers appreciated the innovative approach and want to deepen it through ongoing training.

The deductive method, which involves explicitly presenting grammar rules to students, still dominates many coursebooks and self-study grammar books. However, research has shown that it is ineffective in facilitating learning and guiding conceptualisation processes, as demonstrated by the results of the control group (see Navaz & Hanaan Khaathoon, 2020).

For future research, we aim to conduct a critical study of Italian language teaching in lower secondary schools. Our goal is to provide clearer theoretical and methodological guidelines for teaching and learning Italian hoping to contribute to a more coherent pedagogical rationale and strategies for teacher training.

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